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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002258

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SUBJECT: REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN UPDATE-NOVEMBER 28-29

REF: A. CARACAS 02254

1B. CARACAS 02245

1C. CARACAS 02231

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The "No" bloc held its end-of-campaign rally in downtown Caracas November 29, and initial indications are it is the largest anti-reform rally thus far. Embassy contacts note that the "No" bloc still lacks sufficient electoral witnesses to provide coverage outside of Caracas on election day. President Chavez said publicly that if anything happened to him the United States would be responsible. He also accused the USG of developing a plan to not recognize a "Yes" victory in the referendum. Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro announced he is considering expelling an Emboff following the release of a fabricated CIA memo, if an investigation indicates it to be genuine. The European Union called on government officials to guarantee the voting rights of all Venezuelans. End Summary.

"No" Bloc Concludes Campaign

12. (C) The "No" bloc held its end-of-campaign march and rally in downtown Caracas on November 29 (septel). Initial indications are that it is the largest anti-reform march and significantly larger than previous marches. Leaders of the "No" campaign called on their base to convene at one of five meeting points throughout Caracas and then march to Bolivar Avenue, the meeting point of choice for most pro-government rallies, in downtown Caracas. Opposition party leaders and students held a series of press conferences on November 28 to urge voters to vote against President Chavez' proposed changes. Henrique Capriles Radonski, Baruta municipality mayor, called on both camps to carry out their end-of-campaign activities in a peaceful and respectful manner. Capriles dispelled rumors that the "No" bloc plans to march to the presidential palace Miraflores. The "No" campaign's rally in Plaza Bolivar began in the early afternoon. Separately, the "Yes" campaign plans to hold its final rally November 30 in the same location. It is also expected to be extremely large.

13. (C) Manuel Cova, Secretary General of the opposition Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), told Poloff November 29 that he expects a turnout of 80,000 to 100,000 for the opposition's late afternoon November 29 "No" rally in

Caracas. He credited the university student movement and growing disaffection within Chavismo with strengthening the "No" camp's electoral prospects. Based on his contacts with union and business leaders outside of Caracas, Cova believes several pro-Chavez governors are only paying lip service to the "Yes" campaign and not mobilizing their pro-Chavez bases to the extent they had in previous elections. He conceded that the "No" camp may not be able to field enough election monitors to cover a large number of polling stations and suggested the BRV may resort to vote fraud at voting stations at which the opposition has no monitors present. Whatever the electoral result, Cova opined the opposition needs to continue to work together post-election to "put the brakes" on Chavez via continued democratic means.

Opposition Still Organizing

¶4. (C) With only two days to go, the opposition still appears to be struggling to identify, train, and equip electoral witnesses. In separate conversations with Poloff November 29, two contacts involved in the "No" bloc's electoral preparations said the opposition is well placed to cover the major cities, but not outlying towns where they suspect ghost voting is more likely to occur. While both thought the recent incorporation of Accion Democratica and university students into the electoral effort would boost their chances of having at least one witness at each poll, they noted the opposition still lacks the funds to adequately supply the witnesses with telephones to report irregularities and track the final results.

Chavez' Paranoia Grows

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¶5. (SBU) While speaking to crowd of constitutional reform supporters in a soccer stadium in Merida on November 28, Chavez said, "If something happens to me I blame the USG, I blame the President of the United States." Earlier that day, Chavez called on his supporters to be on high alert because "the enemy (the USG) does not rest." The Venezuelan President also accused the USG of manipulating polling data to cause confusion among Venezuelan voters and of developing a plan to not recognize a "Yes" victory in the referendum.

Maduro: BRV Considers Expelling USG Employee

¶6. (C) In a interview on state-run television November 28, Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolas Maduro said that the BRV is considering the possibility of naming a USG employee at Embassy Caracas "persona non grata." Maduro's statement comes on the heels of the release of a fabricated "confidential" memorandum written (in excellent Spanish) by this USG employee to CIA Director Michael Hayden. The memo entitled "Update on the Last Phase of Operation Pliers (Tenazas)" lays out two purported anti-government options for action post-referendum. Earlier that same day, President Chavez said that "While (Colombian President) Uribe is in power I won't have relations with him or with the government of Colombia."

CNE

¶7. (SBU) In a November 28 press conference Tibisay Lucena, president of the National Electoral Council (CNE), urged all parties to respect the results of the December 2 referendum, regardless of the outcome. Lucena also outlined a timetable

for the distribution of digital voting machines and other voting material. She claimed that "fraud is impossible" in the referendum given that the CNE audited over 100 voting machines earlier this week.

¶8. (SBU) In the same press conference, Lucena announced that the CNE would launch an investigation against the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference (CEV) for its November 26 statement which called on voters to "vote their conscience." Lucena argued that the CEV violated the CNE's norms relating to the dissemination of referendum-related propaganda. According to Lucena, the CEV cannot make public its position on the referendum because it is not registered with one of the two blocs. Lucena said the investigation would commence after December 2.

EU Statement on the Referendum

¶9. (SBU) The Presidency of the European Union (EU), currently headed by Portugal, issued a statement November 28 regarding the referendum. According to it the EU hopes that the end-of-campaigns rallies "will be conducted in a peaceful, balanced, constructive and open manner." The EU also urged that the "exercise of the democratic right of decision by the people of Venezuela is based on full access to information."

Skirmishes Continue

¶10. (SBU) Security forces clashed with opposition-oriented university students across the country on November 28. In Barquisimeto security forces tried to impede students from entering the University of Lisandro Alvarado. At the University of Los Andes in San Cristobal, Tachira state security forces confronted students with tear gas and rubber bullets. Students told the media that over the past few weeks there have been almost daily confrontations with security forces in Tachira. Meanwhile in Caracas, the National Guard and the Metropolitan Police skirmished with students from the Metropolitan University (Unimet). Unimet students were dispensing anti-reform leaflets on a busy Caracas highway when security forces pushed them back to campus grounds using tear gas bombs and rubber bullets. According to the national press, three students were injured.

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